

Inventions of the Negro

Devices Designed by Them on File in Washington.

Result of an Investigation Inaugurated by the Patent Office Into Authenticated Cases Where Negroes Have Patented Labor-Saving Machinery—Names of Some of the Principal Colored Inventors in This Country.

It is all but universally believed that while the Negro possesses imitative, he yet lacks initiative faculty; that while he can utilize what has already been developed, he is woefully wanting in creative and constructive power. Neither his imagination nor his intellect is deemed capable of forming new images or ideas, or of re-assembling old ones so as to put them to new uses.



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It is considered the function of the Negro to work with the tools and instruments that the white man furnishes him, and not to bother himself about the invention of better ones. When the master in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" learned that his slave, George Harris, had invented a machine exhibiting considerable skill and ingenuity, he expressed the prevailing feeling of his race in the reflection "What business has my slave to be inventing machines?"

TRADITIONAL ATTITUDE TOWARD THE NEGRO.

So set has become the traditional attitude of the American mind towards the Negro's intellectual limitations that a leading patent attorney in one of the New England States, responding to a circular letter sent out by the U. S. Patent Office inquiring as to the number and character of inventions by Negroes, stated that he "did not believe the Negro capable of inventing anything but lies." This man's mind must have been cast in the same mould with those of the men who labored so strenuously in ante-bellum days to defeat the project of emancipation.

Fifty years ago the leading periodical in the South, De Bow's Commercial Review—a periodical that seems to have used much of its time and all of its talent in praising cotton and damning the Negro, was vigorous in its assertion of the Negro's "inherent and ineradicable inferiority." In vol-

ume 28 of that now extinct literary wonder the editor was moved to say "In whatever part of the globe we find the Negro free he is generally sunken in vice, sloth and poverty, and in many cases undergoing a more or less rapid process of extinction." In 1859 this same editor declared that if the Negroes were emancipated, "nothing but a miracle could possibly save them from swift and utter extermination." This prediction, viewed in the light of the disclosures by the last census, unfortunately raises a question of veracity between that editor and the Bible, for the latter declares that the days of miracles have passed, and the census shows that the Negroes have not yet been "utterly exterminated." But the thought of the country is turned now again quite distinctly to a discussion of the race problem, and ample evidence is at hand to show a rather widespread disposition to magnify the vices and minimize the virtues of the American-Negro. He is, therefore, clearly in need of every fact in his favor to offset the many discreditable things, true or false, that daily filter through the public press to mould public opinion concerning him.

In no field of endeavor has the American mind stamped itself more indelibly upon the progress of the age than in the line of useful and practical inventions; and it is of no little importance, on his own account, to know just what contribution the American-



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Negro has made to the inventive thought of his country. Unfortunately for the seeker after this particular information, the public records of the Patent Office offer practically no assistance in getting at the facts, since those records distinguish only as to nations, not as to races. The Englishman and the American may each easily ascertain the standing of his nation in the list of patentees, but the Irishman and the Negro are kept in the dark—especially the latter. The official records of the United States Patent Office, with a single exception, give no hint whatever that, of the many thousands of mechanical inventions for which patents are constantly being granted by this government, any patent has ever been granted to a Negro. The single exception is the name of Henry Blair, of Maryland, to whom the official records refer as "a Colored man," stating that he was granted a patent for a corn harvester in 1834, and another patent for a similar invention in 1836. It can be safely assumed that this Henry Blair was a "free person of color," as the language of those days would have phrased it, for our government at that time seemed committed to the theory that "A slave could not be granted

a patent for his invention." And this dictum gave rise to some rather embarrassing situations on several occasions. For instance, in 1857, a Negro slave, living with his master in the State of Mississippi, perfected a valuable invention which his master sought to have protected by a U. S. patent. In law a patent is a contract between the government and the inven-



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tor and his assignees. When the master made a formal application, therefore, at the United States Patent Office the Commissioner of Patents refused to grant the patent on the ground that, inasmuch as the master was not the inventor he could not make the proper oath; and that the Negro slave, not being a citizen, could neither enter into a contract with the government nor legally assign his rights to his master. The master was not satisfied with this ruling of the Commissioner of Patents, and at once appealed the case to the Hon. Secretary of the Interior who, in 1858, referred the whole matter to the Attorney-General of the United States for decision. This latter official, who was Hon. Jeremiah S. Black, of Pennsylvania, confirmed the decision of the Commissioner of Patents, thus finally refusing both master and slave a patent for the slave's invention. This case is reported in volume 9 of Opinions of Attorney-Generals, U. S., page 171. Another instance of a similar character occurred a few years later, when a slave, named Montgomery, belonging to the estate of President Jefferson Davis and his brother Joseph, in the State of Mississippi, invented a propeller for vessels. Montgomery constructed an excellent model of his invention displaying remarkable mechanical skill in both wood and metal working. An attempt was made to obtain a patent for this invention, but a patent was denied on the same ground as in the preceding case. The special excellence of the Montgomery propeller, however, secured for it general public notice throughout the South, and the favorable comments upon it by the southern press at the time led to its adoption and use by the Confederate navy. President Jefferson Davis personally interested himself in the effort made to have the invention patented by the United States Government, and it is said that his zeal in his slave's behalf even led him to try to induce the Confederate Congress to enact a law by which some provision would be made for recognizing the inventive talent of slaves. The project, however, did not succeed. Jefferson Davis had but slight following in this as well as in other aspects of

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